'Work began in 1812, in a thatched barn . . .'

Davison gets a name for good education

ABOVE Education pioneer the Rev William Davison, who worked tirelessly for the school that was to bear his name.

BELOW Davison School as it was in Chapel Road.

AS DAVISON CE High School for Girls looks back over 25 years on a 'new' site, Jean Pitts researches its history, which began in 1812 as a result of the vision and inspiration of a Worthing cleric

AT A QUICK glance the Rev William Davison has that gentle, unwilling-to-offend look that you might associate with the bashful curate of legend whose egg was 'good in parts.'

But look again and you will see that this is the strong face of a man of vision.

For this 19th century St Paul's cleric gave his name to the oldest school still in existence in the town. To him belongs the inspiration that made Worthing famous for the first free infants' school in England — and Davison, 'the old school' for many generations of local girls.

His pioneering work began in 1812 with the opening of a school in a thatched barn in High Street, Worthing, with money raised by public subscription.

First

But soon larger premises were needed and there was a move to North Street. Then in 1817 an infant school was opened, which proved to be the first of its kind. Just how long ago this was can be seen if you remember that peace was just returning to Europe after the ruling of Napoleon at Waterloo!

In 1834, when the first Davison School was built, the stage coaches ran past the front of the building in Chapel Road on their way to the sea front.

The Rev William Davison, who hail worked tirelessly for the school, had, unfortunately died two years earlier, but this was to become his lasting memorial.

In the early days the girls were taught needlework, knitting and straw plaiting and Christian principles as well as the three Rs.

Youngest

They regularly crossed the road to St Paul's to attend services, sitting in the special gallery that had been built for them.

In 1861 a landmark was reached when a young woman of 19, Charlotte Mason, came to teach at the school. She delighted in the work, loved the children — especially the youngest in the school, a fifty of them — and two years later become the school's first headmistress.

In later years she achieved a national reputation as an educationist and founded the Parents National Educational Union and the Charlotte Mason College. Her writings were influential in the world of education.

Charlotte believed in treating children as persons in their own right — an idea that was quite revolutionary at the time.

Independent

She believed that to educate, you had first to build the character and train the mind. Education could not be force-fed — knowledge came from the assimilation of facts and ideas.

At a time when learning was by rote, she was working on an independent and active style of learning and advocating a scheme of state education for all children up to the age of 18. This was combined with the state training of teachers.

In 1874, Charlotte left Davison and went as a lecturer to Bishop Otter College, Chichester, which had just been founded. She later became vice-principal.

According to the registers during Charlotte Mason's time as headmistress, the pupils were the children of the local tradesmen — the coach-builders, carpenters, gardeners, ironmongers, publicans and lodging-house keepers.

Cane

The log-books show that the children were kept away 'to help with the lodgers' and that they simply stayed away for a regatta or the beach. Unsettled by holidays, the treatment prescribed in 'a session of marching and drilling.'

Three or four classes were held at the same time in one room and good, quiet behaviour was essential. The cane, given in front of the whole room, was administered frequently, and the stupids' had to wear the dunce's cap.

Violin lessons could be had for threepence a lesson from Madame Fritz Seebold, and the children could borrow a good book with a moral ending from the library by paying twopence a year. Poetry reading meant long sad poems, usually about dying children.

The Sussex names of that time are still familiar — Town, Lindup, Woolgar, Paine, Duffield, Chidwick and Sandell.

Knowing

The last two families provided headmistresses for the school. Jane Chidwick, like her brothers and sisters, went to the school, then became a pupil teacher and eventually headmistress. She was still holding this post when she died in 1926 at the age of 49.

Kate Sandell was headmistress from then until 1936. She came to this position knowing all about teaching at Davison School.

When she was about 12, and still in Standard 7 she started teaching part-time. At 14, she was indentured as a pupil teacher, and four years later became the school's first trained mistress at a salary of £60 a year.

The school was always outgrowing its accommodation and in 1927 it was rebuilt. At this point, the boy pupils went to other schools and the school became a girls' senior school.

Under the 1944 Education Act, the school was given secondary modern status and in 1951 it became a state-controlled school despite an attempt to retain it under church control. It was not possible to raise enough funds for this. However, the Church is always represented on the governing body.

Then, in 1960, 25 years ago, Davison School began an entirely new era, in new buildings surrounded by playing fields in East Worthing.

CHARLOTTE MASON, first headmistress of Davison. She believed that you had to build the character and train the mind.

— and old standards are maintained today

DAVISON CE High School for Girls opened on a new site in Selbourne Road, Worthing, as a West Sussex County Council school in 1960 — leaving behind the cramped conditions of the old school in Chapel Road, with its non-stop passing traffic.

There were then 450 girls on the register, drawn from 14 different middle schools in an area which stretched from Littlehampton to Southwick — parents having made the choice of a single-sex school for their daughters, and possibly having been influenced by the religious affiliation.

There are now 607 girls at the school and continually growing numbers have meant that a building programme has kept going.

The main building with its south-facing classrooms, library and combined hall and gymnasium, has been added to many times.

There is a big sports hall, three science laboratories, a language laboratory, two art rooms and a new kitchen. A heated swimming pool has been provided by the school's parent-teacher association.

Behaviour

Back in 1812, the Rev William Davison would have thought a school like this nothing short of miraculous.

But the girls, although more outgoing and liberated than their 19th century counterparts, would have been more instantly recognisable, for a certain Davison standard of good behaviour and courtesy has been maintained.

Neatly dressed in the uniform of white blouse, navy skirt and red and navy tie, he would have approved of the way they stand and politely say good morning to the mistress entering the classroom.

The standard of voluntary service to the elderly in the locality, helping at boarding centres and day centres, and giving the elderly a summer garden party, would have impressed him also. As well as the fact that they run a playgroup for handicapped children during the summer holidays.

Engineering

That pioneering headmistress Charlotte Mason, who more than 100 years ago fought to extend the curriculum beyond the three Rs to nature study, needlework and domestic economy would have been astonished to learn that these Davison girls can take two foreign languages and enjoy foreign exchange visits.

She would have found the large science department where the girls learn physics, chemistry and biology quite unbelievable. And goodness knows what she would have made of the fact that local firm Eurotherm is sponsoring one of the girls to read engineering at university!

Muriel Thomas is the eighth headmistress since Charlotte Mason and a woman with a very individual style of running the school.

A gentle, caring woman, she obtained her BA degree in English from Exeter University and was teaching in Hampshire when the Hungarian uprising took place.

Refugees

Refugees were coming into this country and Miss Thomas decided to help by offering her services to the British Council for Aid to Refugees.

For two years she taught English — and incidentally learnt Hungarian — in a refugee camp housing 2,000 at Eath and reveals that this experience completely changed her life. She still works for refugees.

In 1968 she became head of English at Davison and was promoted deputy head in 1972. She succeeded headmistress Muriel Mackenzie when retired through ill-health in 1986.

Miss Thomas believes strongly in good manners and high standards of behaviour related to the need for consideration for others.

'But I am also very proud of the academic achievements of the girls in recent years,' she says.

MURIEL THOMAS, head of Davison School. 'Girls must have consideration for others.'
Picture by Mick Cannon.